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# How U.S. General Saved Saigon

BY MALCOLM W. BROWNE

SAIGON (AP)—In the last six months Saigon has been spared twice from the destruction of aerial bombing and all-out civil war.

Both times attempted coups could easily have ended with the destruction of a city of nearly 2,000,000 residents and the complete disruption of war efforts against the Viet Cong.

Both times disaster was headed off largely by an affable, middle-aged American fighter pilot with an exceptional flair for diplomacy and making friends.

He is Brig. Gen. Robert R. Rowland, 47, senior adviser to the Vietnamese air force.

Rowland is known throughout the Vietnamese general staff as a peacemaker and friend. To Brig. Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky, commander of the Vietnamese air force, Rowland is "my best friend."

ON SEPT. 13, a strong rebel force under the command of Brig. Gen. Lam Van Phat rolled into Saigon, seizing all of the capital but the airport. Ky, who remained loyal to the government, threatened to blast the rebels and Saigon.

Delicate diplomatic maneuvers by Rowland prevented



GEN. NGUYEN CAO KY  
*His ultimatum . . .*

the bombing of Saigon. Rowland also contributed to the soothing of tempers that led to the collapse of the coup.

He worked around the clock with Vietnamese officers, persuading them gently but firmly not to start shooting at each other.

IT HAPPENED again Feb. 19, with almost exactly the same cast. This time both the rebels and loyalists were spoiling for battle and the rebels had seized Saigon airport. Ky and most of his pilots escaped to Bien Hoa airport 12 miles away and were out for blood.

The rebels under Phat and Col. Pham Ngoc Thao occupied Saigon airport with tanks. Virtual hostages inside the airport compound were some 6,000 American servicemen and a vital hub of all anti-Communist air activity in the nation.

Ky threatened to bomb Saigon airport and rebel strongpoints in the city at 5:30 p.m. if the rebels did not capitulate. Rowland was inside the rebel-held airport and began talking.

KNOWING the professional capability of the Vietnamese air force, "he said" I was worried when I heard that Ky was at Bien Hoa air base threatening a strike on Saigon airport. "Phat had seized Ky's Saigon headquarters and was holding three of Ky's officers hostage. I felt this was a direct affront to Ky as air force commander and understood his anger.

"I had been sitting with



GEN. ROBERT ROWLAND  
*. . . worried him plenty.*

Phat for three hours talking to Ky by radio. I knew that if one of Ky's fighters then buzzing the airport dropped one bomb the whole American and Vietnamese joint effort would have gone down the drain.

"And that's what I told Ky.

He is a mature, experienced soldier and any lesser man would have pulled the trigger at that point, but he didn't."

**KY, THE DASHING**, 33-year-old commander, told it this way:

"I told Rowland to get out of the airport because I was going to bomb it. But Rowland said he wouldn't leave and that I could kill him if I wanted to but he wouldn't leave. But Rowland is my best friend. How could I do that?"

"At sunrise, Ky's Skyraider fighters were over Saigon airport again and this time it really looked as if they meant business," Rowland recalled.

"I talked to Ky to try to get him once again to call off his attack. He said: 'It's too late. I've already given the strike order.'"

"I said: 'Don't be silly. You have radios. Call them back. And you'd better do it fast because I hear Skyraiders overhead right now.'"

"Ky did call off the strike and it is a mark of the mutual respect we have for each other."

Another tense moment came when the air force hostages were spirited away briefly, but

Rowland successfully insisted on their being returned.

**FINALLY** the coup collapsed and Rowland was able to catch a few hours sleep, but he knows he may find himself in the same role again.

"I know Ky and his people," Rowland said. "And they're as tired of coups and counter-coups as we are. They want to fight the war and they're deeply worried about the political meanderings and religious political activities of some people here."

"But there are always some ambitious people around who are ready to try something on the weak-knees who can be swayed by all kinds of political pressures."

**ROWLAND** joined the Army Air Corps in 1938, and spent World War II as a P-47 fighter pilot in the Pacific. He was credited with bringing down eight enemy planes and flying 203 combat missions.

Among other Air Force assignments Rowland spent nearly a year with the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington in 1952 and 1953.

He says he is working harder than he ever did in the past.

"But nothing I'd done before coming here was really like this," he laughed. "It's a new role for me."